

Christmas in January

On the second pass, we saw lights off to the right. There were no other visual references, but one light was a little brighter at about 3 o'clock, about three miles away. I focused on that light and a few others in the area. We didn't find out until much later those lights were nowhere near to the airport; they were at the only hotel on the island, the Captain Cook.

At the end of the second pass, the copilot saw a faint red glow to the left of the aircraft. We turned in that direction, and, as we passed, we felt they may have been the trucks. They were small, old firetrucks, probably from the 1950s or 1960s. They did not put out any appreciable light, and the drivers had abandoned them, probably afraid to remain in them as we tried to land. After we passed and began our second missed approach at 400 feet, I saw what appeared to be the first 50 feet or so of the runway threshold. With my lack of depth perception, it looked like a building standing vertically.

We continued turning to downwind on the go-around and once again reentered the clouds. Once we passed the glow of the trucks, there was no lighting or visual references. With flaps at 100 percent, I advanced the throttles toward maximum power. We climbed rapidly with flaps at this setting, and I pushed over the nose to maintain airspeed and to prevent reentering the clouds. As we passed through 1,100 feet, I told Chris what I was doing, and we would get it back down. We worked our way down to 1,000 feet, then to 600 or 700 feet, as we turned final.

Chris said he saw the trucks. As I controlled altitude and airspeed during the descent, I faintly could

see the taillights, but I had no visual reference for where the runway began or ended. I saw the light from the trucks and the glow of the headlights beyond the red taillights. As we rolled out on final, I worked to obtain a 090-degree runway heading, and to continue descending to a point where we might land if the runway environment became apparent. I didn't want to take another go-around. I rolled out on final and steadied the airplane toward the red lights.

Between 150 and 200 feet, I told Chris to turn on our landing lights. We had left them off because, when they were on, we could see nothing but gray haze and rain on the windscreen. As we flew over the trucks, I saw the runway environment and made the final descent. The trucks disappeared under the aircraft as I brought it into a flare, and we touched down. I applied full reverse and firm braking to stop us. I didn't know at what point on the runway I had touched down or the distance I had covered during the landing roll. When we came to a stop, I turned the aircraft around and called for the after-landing checklist. After the nine-hour flight, I was relieved and very thankful to be on deck.

After the flight, we celebrated a great rescue and a safe recovery. I have been in similar situations during my flying career with the Coast Guard and always feel the same way when the flight is over. I feel you only have so many of those kinds of flights in you, and you leave a little of yourself in the plane when you walk away from one. I felt that way that night; we all did. It felt like Christmas to us.



LCdr. Sultzter flies the C-130 from USCG Air Station, Barbers Point, Hawaii.



US Coast Guard Photo